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Mathematical Dictionaries and Heritage in the Eighteenth Century

This article will examine eighteenth-century mathematical dictionaries and their relationship to the idea of heritage. The period is apt for two reasons.

First, dictionaries—or encyclopedias, as we now often call the more "factual," less lexical among them—were, for the first time, becoming fashionable across Europe. In addition, mathematics was just starting to be treated in dictionaries in Europe's vernaculars, whether in general dictionaries such as Antoine Furetière's*Dictionaire universel* (1690) or in specialized dictionaries such as Joseph Moxon's *Mathematicks Made Easie* (1679).

Second, matters of heritage were already important within modern European lexicography. Since the early sixteenth century, the authors of lexical dictionaries, for example, had sought to connect themselves with the heritage of ancient or historical languages, and lexicographers' names—notably that of Ambrogio Calepino, whose surname became a synonym for the polyglot dictionary—had occasionally developed into a piece of heritage in the dictionary-making community and the Republic of Letters.

At the same time, questions of mathematical heritage were becoming increasingly salient. On the one hand, mathematics had been disrupted and revitalized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the development of "analysis"—algebra and calculus. Making sense of those developments was a matter of patriotic as well as intellectual interest, as in the eighteenth century's quarrels over priority in the discovery of calculus. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the relevance of history within mathematics was heightened by a growing tendency to draw parallels between the progress of mathematics and the progress of human thinking as part of a general Enlightenment.

In the following pages, I will begin by examining European mathematical dictionaries from their beginnings in the late seventeenth century to 1800. Here I will be retreading ground covered by Gert Schubring in an article of 1998, but I will add to his corpus and highlight aspects of the dictionaries that he did not study. In the second half of the article, I will analyze the idea of heritage in eighteenth-century mathematical dictionaries in two ways: first, in the sense of a heritage within a commercial niche and the lexicographical community; and second, in the sense of a general mathematical heritage being mustered and celebrated.